DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 056 748 PS 005 034

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TITLE Programs for Infant Mothering to Develop a Sense of Self and Competence in Infancy.
INSTITUTION Children's Hospital of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 3 Apr 71
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 3, 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Child Care Workers; Day Care Services; Disadvantaged Groups; Emotional Development; Foster Homes; Home Visits; Infants; Intellectual Development; *Intervention; Mothers; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Participation; *Self Concept; Socialization

ABSTRACT

Intervention programs for the disadvantaged should be based on an understanding of the behavior and attitudes of people in poverty. Poor people share a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, a lack of belief that they can change their situations, and low self-esteem. Programs to train child care workers who are themselves disadvantaged (parents, foster home mothers, day care and institutional staff) should show trainees that what they are doing is important, and that how they stimulate and interact with the children in their care can vitally affect the children's development and chances for the future. This objective can be accomplished by involving parents and staff in decision making, showing respect for them as individuals and respect for what they know, and discussing with them the babies' preferences and individual styles. To effect meaningful and lasting changes in children, parents must be involved in intervention programs. Such programs should stress respect for cultural differences and for parents' choices on how to raise their children, coupled with constant and intensive support for the caregivers. (NH)

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Programs for Infant Mothering to Develop a Sense of Self and Competence in Infancy[1]

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Lawrence Frank stressed the need for understanding human behavior - and certainly the behavior and development of an infant - in terms of a self organizing system that operates with a variety of feedbacks. He called repeatedly for the formulation of conceptual models that are relevant to multidimensional complexes of open systems; at the same time he noted that the life sciences concerned with organisms have focused primarily upon analytic approaches that fractionate the organism into selected variables, with the search for linear operating mechanisms.

Professor Frank would have been very unhappy with the many studies that are appearing now showing the linear relationship between certain types of sensory stimulation and observed response. He stressed organization and meaning - for him, no event had meaning outside its context. The infant's physiologic state, his past experience, his already developed system of expectations and readinesses, his uniqueness and individuality, his inherited potentials and how they

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1 Paper presented at the Lawrence K. Frank symposium at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 3, 1971.

are shaped by experience - all of these form the basis for the effects of any program of intervention. He was concerned with the "adequacy and competence of an identified subject for coping with his life experiences as contrasted with statistical evaluation of a sample".*

> "All over the world infants are being cared for and reared in accordance with the traditional beliefs and practices of the cultural group to which they belong. What parents do to and for the infant, what they encourage or suppress, and how they induct the infant into their design for living, enculturates and socializes the child and shapes his emerging personality for participation in group life. This expectation of what an infant should become and the insistent pressure to transform the infant and the child into the kind of personality which each group favors"* is a fascinating field of study.

At the Children's Hospital in Washington, we have been concerned with this complex approach to infants, for we have seen repeatedly the effects on infants of being socialized for failure. Mothers whose own experiences in life have left

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*L. K. Frank. On the Importance of Infancy. New York: Random House, 1966.

them with the expectation that nothing is ever going to be any good, teach their children not to try, not to expose themselves to the possibility of further failure. This mechanism of maintenance of self-esteem has manifold consequences for the development of the children.

The incitement to learning, the life-long incentive to know more about the world, is developed far earlier than many have realized. This development takes place in the context of a relation to a person who shows one that the balance of rewards is greater than disappointments, that the world is, by and large, an interesting and even an exciting place to be. When the balance of experience tips toward boredom, apathy, fear or frustration, the desire to know about the world disappears. In the situation of too many unmet needs and overwhelming stimulation, learning <u>not</u> to respond, <u>not</u> to pay attention or <u>not</u> to think becomes of prime importance. Learning has a different goal: not intellectual content, but techniques for survival and maintenance of self-esteem. Failure avoidance becomes essential; achievement motivation is just as high in these children as in any others, but what they want to achieve is protection, not advancement.

We have worked with many groups from disadvantaged backgrounds, both in homes and in institutions; the principles of what goes wrong, and how one tries to modify the development

of the infants are the same. I would like to review with you some of the ideas we have about what happens in the adult-infant interaction and how one may intervene to modify that interaction so that the babies might develop with a positive sense of themselves and a competence in coping with the world.

We see the sense of competence and the sense of self as the organizing processes of all the cognitive functions that are so stressed in isolation these days. We are interested not only in performance skill but in habits and attitudes that foster intellectual competence - curiosity, persistence and active exploration. John Holt has an interesting way of putting it:

> "When we talk about intelligence we do not mean the ability to get a good score on a certain kind of test, or even the ability to do well in school; these are at best only indicators of something larger, deeper, and far more important. By intelligence, we mean a style of life, a way of behaving in various situations, and particularly in new, strange, and perplexing situations. The true test of intelligence is not how much we know how to do but how we behave when we don't know what to do.
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> "The intelligent person, young or old, meeting a new situation or problem, opens himself up to it;

he tries to take in with mind and senses everything he can about it; he thinks about <u>it</u>, instead of about himself or what it might cause to happen to him; he grapples with it boldly, imaginatively, resourcefully, and if he fails to master it he looks without shame or fear at his mistakes and learns what he can from them. This is intelligence. Clearly its roots lie in a certain feeling about life, and one's self with respect to life. Just as clearly, unintelligence is not what most psychologists seem to suppose, the same thing as intelligence only less of it. It is an entirely different style of behavior arising out of an entirely different set of attitudes."*

Please remember that the programs from which I have generalized the principles I will discuss range from those oriented to teaching family education aides to work with infants and young children in a home setting, to training caregivers for day care homes and centers and institutions for homeless children, to training women to be group foster mothers for children without families.

As a group, disadvantaged parents and the caregivers in the institutions (who are essentially the same people) share a set of characteristics, no matter how individual

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*John Holt. <u>How Children Fail</u>. New York: Pitman, 1964.

they are in surface manifestations. This set of characteristics are an outcome of their own coping with a cruel and senseless world. We must understand the meaningfulness of their behavior and how to modify it before we can successfully intervene with the infants. The adults share a sense of powerlessness, of helplessness and of hopelessness in ever being able to change their situations, and a lack of belief that anything they could do would help. James Coleman comments on this: "It appears that children from [redacted]advantaged groups assume that the environment will respond if they are able to affect it; children from disadvantaged groups do not make this assumption, but in many cases assume that nothing that they can do can affect the environment - it will give them benefits or withhold them but not as a consequence of their own action."* This involves also a lowered self esteem; the firm belief that whatever they do doesn't matter. A consequence of this is that they believe that what they do with and for their infants makes no difference, and concomitantly they believe that what the infant does is totally meaningless.

The first program principle, then, for the caregivers (staff or home mothers) is to show them that what they are doing is important: what they do with babies is important

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*James Coleman. Equality of Educational Opportunity. Washington, D.C.: Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, 1966.

and has important consequences for the babies' futures. Child care is not just changing diapers and stuffing bottles in screaming mouths. These two concepts form the basis of all successful training and have appeared to be the most difficult ones to convey, for they touch the deeply rooted core of lack of self-esteem in the adults: one, the idea that a child's behavior, no matter how young he is, is meaningful and two, the idea that what you, the adult, do is important and has a major impact on the development of the child.

This cannot be conveyed in words only, but must be rooted in action: parent and staff involvement in decision making; respect for them as individuals and respect for what they know; discussion with them about the babies' preferences and styles; treating them in the way you want them to treat the babies.

Gradually, over time, it is possible to demonstrate the changes in the babies--if the adults will trust you a little and do some of the things you suggest (talking directly to baby, eye-to-eye contact, visual stimulation - mobiles, hand ys, etc, etc.) They then can see apathetic babies turn into smiling, responsive ones who give something back to the adults - and the process has started.

What other characteristics do the disadvantaged share?

What are some of the other effects of a life of poverty and hopelessness?

- A depression, not necessarily as an affect, but as a basic ego state, which leads to an inhibition of functions. There simply is not enough energy mobilized to deal with the issues that are less important than immediate survival. You must give these mothers enough personal support with solving the day to day issues - getting food, rat poison, stopping up leaking ceilings and unstopping the plumbing - so that they will have enough energy available to attend to the babies.

- A defensive warding off of positive affect. The infants are supposed to know, and indeed sometimes they do, that the adults love them even if the adults direct a massive amount of verbal and physical aggression toward them. For many of these adults, "happiness is a suspension of disgust" (Ralph Waldo Emerson). You must help both the adults and infants to re-experience pleasure in the simple things.

- A mistrust of caring, warmth and gentleness expressed too openly. It is far too easy to be hurt; you protect yourself against this possibility. Take things slowly - don't push - let them learn to trust you at <u>their</u> pace.

- An anticipation of failure, so they don't try.

Encouragement repeatedly is vital.

- An intense need to be "good", to inhibit all curiosity and autonomous action. When a mother is overwhelmed with the responsibilities of caring for her children, when there is little or no money and hunger is a constant companion, the last thing in the world a mother wants or can cope with is an alert, curious, "into everything" child. These mothers also know that they must socialize their children to passivity, or the children will never be tolerated in the ghetto schools. A passive, non-learning, quiet child will at least be allowed to remain in the classroom; an active, questioning, independent one will be in conflict constantly with the teacher. This encouragement of passivity can be confusing, for at the same time there is a necessary valuing of aggressiveness and strength in coping. By demonstrating the importance of curiosity, learning and exploration this seeming paradox can be resolved, and they can be helped to understand how the system can be changed.

- The expectation that the world is a capricious place, with happenings dependent on chance. The structural aspects so valued by the middle class are dysfunctional in disadvantaged circumstances, and it is these structural aspects - the attitudes to time, to order, to regularity and impulse control - that we now realize contribute so much to the cognitive

efficiency of a child. Infant programs should be set up with much structure and regularity in order to help the infants to learn there are times when things happen - sleeping, feeding, playing, etc. Consistency, continuity and contingency must be the key words of any program.

- The generalization of responses to fit a wide variety of circumstances - e.g., treating all children alike and finding great difficulty in accepting the idea that there are individual differences in needs and preferences. Because of this difficulty in seeing the babies as <u>individuals</u>, there must be constant, repeated stress on <u>individualization</u> for babies and caregivers.

- Lack of persistance toward goals. If you'll never make it, why keep trying? There must be a definite reward system and a great deal of encouragement.

- Communication is non-verbal, body language. Words don't mean anything - it's the action that counts. <u>Language</u> must be stressed: emphasize the importance of giving explanations for why things are being done, why things are the way they are - to teach that there are reasons for things - not just "shut up and come on," or "don't ask why all the time."

- The lack of understanding of the possibility of real cooperative relationships between adults - the sense of isolation and aloneness. The concept of working together and

sharing must be crucial in all programs.

- The locus of blame when something goes wrong is always external for there is little sense of internal control. Program supervisors must not work from guilt, but rather from a positive sense of "well, what shall we do now, how shall we cope?"

- Low emotional support and low achievement orientation. Because of this, emphasis must be on an attitude of "You really can make it"; develop an expectation of support and facilitation from the humans around you.

- The control mechanisms consist of threats, warnings about severe bodily harm, monsters, etc. so the anxiety is extremely high - the children hear and believe the words. The new idea that controls are important but not always via punishment must be conveyed.

- The enormous difference between teaching desired behavior rather than suppressing or eliminating undesired behavior must be made real and meaningful.

- The importance of encouraging differentiation and elaboration vs restriction and limitation must be demonstrated. At the same time, adults must be helped to understand that the way the child is socialized means something. If an adult says "You're a bad boy," the child hears the words and forgets the smile even if it's there. If the

implicit role expectation is that the child will be bad, will be a failure, then he probably will be. "If you think I'm a bum, I'll be a bum" is a most frequent response.

After hearing all of this, you may well say that I am not talking about infant programs, but about family or adult programs. That is precisely the point that I want to make - that we are convinced that no real changes - lasting, meaningful changes in babies - can occur without changes in the life styles of the families or institutions involved with the children. We are not interested only in a 10 to 20 point increase in a D.Q. or an I.Q. score that disappears 4 months after the intervention study stops. We must modify for both the infants and the adults the issue of powerlessness and how it effects their actions. The program must be directed to the development of competence and skill development, based on enhanced self esteem and solidified positive identity. We have ample evidence that "simple" intervention does not stick. It has been shown repeatedly that the beautiful gains the children show after one or two years drop away (Caldwell, Schaeffer etc.). Parents must be involved in the programs for the changes in the children to be meaningful. But many will say, why involve parents in child care programs? Why not work with the children

directly and hope the parents will leave you alone? A number of intervention projects have in the past adopted just such a model; day care services have frequently been run by practitioners who felt that as long as they said "Hello" to the parent who brought the child in the morning and picked him up again in the afternoon, their obligation was satisfied.

Two major reasons seem to have accounted by this behavior of ignoring parents: first, parent "education" projects had proven unsuccessful in the past in effecting changes in actual child rearing practices (Chilman, "Poor Families and their Patterns of Child Care") and second, practitioners frequently over-identify with the child and their desire then is to "save" the child from the "bad" parents.

What we are saying now is - work with the adults or nothing will happen. What do we mean by working with the adults? First I'll say what I don't mean - I don't mean that one is supposed to say WE KNOW HOW YOU OUGHT TO RAISE YOUR KIDS AND YOU DON'T - WE'LL TEACH YOU WHAT TO DO. This is offensive, disrespectful and just as damaging of self esteem as anything could be. What then must be done? Spell out the options, the alternatives, the consequences of the various options and then let people make

their own choices. Respect a person's right not to choose the options you happen to prefer. Respect people's feelings about programs. Let them make their own mistakes if necessary, but let them know what it is to have the right to make a decision for themselves. Babies and adults alike learn and grow by making choices, by taking certain actions, and then suffering from or reveling in the consequences of those actions.

Respect people's strengths and respect the meaningfulness of their behavior in terms of the total life situation in which they are living.

Get rid of the deprivation model and begin to understand the meaning of behavior in a cultural context, in context of the expectations and the needs of the culture and a family unit.

Communicate - listen to what people say - respect their feelings, and respect their knowledge, and respect the meaningfulness of their behavior in terms of their own life circumstances.

Expect responsible behavior and give responsibility.

Supply the tools so the children and the adults can move between cultures. Don't ask the families to abandon their cultures. Help build new self esteem through experiences of success for both the adults and the babies.

With this as a context, what then are the program principles?

- Turn them on, jazz them up. Help the adults and the babies to see that what they're doing is exciting and important.

- Emphasize the extreme importance of <u>focussing</u> the adult on the baby and the baby on the adult, and focussing both of them on the attributes of the environment. Here is where one makes use of a structured curriculum as a way of focussing and sharpening attention.

- Encourage pleasure and joy in the interaction between people, and thus stimulate the desire to learn. It's motivation that makes the difference.

- Show respect for individual preferences and individual styles of approach to problems.

- Stress the ethnic appropriateness of programs, and their continuity with home styles (in foods, in decorations, etc.) Not all children must be fed peanut butter. Collard greens and tortillas are just as good.

- Pay attention to the issue of staff status. For example, if all supervisors are white and all aides are black, the ethnic hierarchy is taught without words.

- Supply the models for competence. Show the adults, via meaningful relationships, that there are different ways of coping with problems, and they then show the children.

- Turn passive into active. Encourage the babies' and the adults' active attempts; don't impose passive "stimulation" projects in which the adult is supposed just to do something to the baby. Encourage activities initiated by the infant and by the staff.

- No games or activities are "special" or important by themselves. There are many roads to Rome. The warmth and feeling tone of the environment come first. Babies sense encouragement to learn, to experience, to enjoy. They sense equally quickly the attitudes of discouragement and disinterest, and themselves become apathetic. At the same time materials must be provided for learning, for active mastery. It's not the sheer amount of stimulation, but the way it is organized or the way cue distinctiveness is fostered. There must be encouragement of meaning, information sharing and interaction. Think for example of the difference between thrusting a doll into an apathetic baby's hand vs pointing out eyes, nose, exclaiming over the dress and the colors. As Michael Lewis has said, it's not the frequency of the behavior but the use of the behavior that makes the difference.

- No baby should be forced to respond. Don't push and don't over-load. Pay attention to the child's cues that he has had enough or that he wants more. Swing with the child.

Don't interrupt natural rhythms; let a child continue with an activity until he has reached a sense of completion. If he wants to complete something, don't interrupt his cycle. Try not to change activities because you think it is time for the baby to be bored or to do something else. Let the child have the repeated experience of being able to complete an activity and satisfy his curiosity completely about an object. Watch for cues of irritability or withdrawal, or any cue that the baby has had enough. Don't make the baby feel he has done something wrong by not responding. A painful example I once witnessed was of an aide teaching "up/down" with blocks to an uninterested baby. The aide was becoming increasingly angry while the baby was becoming increasingly restive, but she wouldn't stop because it was time for his up-down lesson.

- There must be intensive and constant support for the caregivers.

Somebody of importance must say this is an important and exciting thing to do, which raises the whole issue of familial and institutional morale (for middle class mothers also re their kids). Specific program elements for self image and sense of competence follow after this - the smiling; talking; eye contacts; calling the child by his name; mirror play; frequent praise and encouragement; opportunity for exploratory and curiosity behaviors; having fun; facilitating

self help skills; independence; opportunities for aggressive play; following the kids' lead, not interrupting their patterns; not doing everything for them or to them; letting them learn to cope with frustration, etc.

In summary, then, how do we relate what we know about child development to care programs - whether in day care centers, homes, or institutions?

First - there must be a variety of models and an individualization of programming instead of the pressure for uniformity that is so prevalent.

Second - if you help foster ego growth in certain areas - language, conceptualization, etc., then the secondary rewards from success in these areas are extremely important, even if you haven't rebuilt the entire system of values, object relations, etc. We must stress the on-going importance of success in the building of a sense of competence and effectiveness in dealing with the world.

Third - there must be parent control of programs in order to modify the sense of powerlessness and helplessness. We advocate consumer control to bring about economic and social change. For example, in those day care centers where the mothers are employed, the mothers do best. The Headstart findings are clear: the greater the level of parental

involvement, the greater the level of parental change and community change.

Fourth - programs must be oriented to child and family needs - rap sessions, soul kitchens, outings, ombudsmen, sessions on how to work for community change (clean streets, improved housing, etc.); on consumer purchasing; on home decoration; on care of clothing; on child rearing practices.

I think we have underplayed the crucial importance of new figures for identification to the child and the family; we have underplayed the human element that produces changes. Lawrence Frank clearly understood organized complexity. I think it is time we took his teachings to heart.

Thank you.